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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S COURTESY CALL WITH PRIME MINISTER FICO

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik for Reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary. Ambassador Obsitnik had a cordial, almost hour-long introductory meeting with Prime Minister Fico on December 17. The Prime Minister expressed his desire to maintain open and constructive relations with the U.S. Embassy and noted how pleased he was to have the opportunity to meet with the Ambassador so soon after his arrival in country. The Prime Minister reviewed briefly current topics, e.g., stability of the coalition, Slovakia's entry into Schengen and its Euro bid. Ambassador Obsitnik recalled the long and close ties between the U.S. and Slovakia, including during very challenging periods, and highlighted his desire to strengthen further bilateral relations and cooperation on a range of issues. In response to the Ambassador's introductory remarks, PM Fico spoke briefly about the Hungarian minority and bilateral relations with Hungary, Kosovo, the investment climate and requirements of Slovakia and VWP. Fico made clear that, to date, EU unity on Kosovo consisted only of a decision to deploy an ESDP Mission. Regarding Kosovar independence, coordination between Kosovo and the international community (EU, U.S. and Russia) would play a role in determining the Slovak stance, but that Slovakia did not want to be the "exception" on Kosovo. PM Fico underscored the steps the GOS has taken to address the concerns of the Hungarian minority and repeated several times that the government does not want tensions within the state over minority issues, nor with Hungary. The Visa Waiver Program is not the most important element of the U.S.-Slovak relationship, according to PM Fico. That said, from the standpoint of equality and reciprocity, Fico believes it is only right that Slovakia (particularly as a Schengen member) should be exempt from visa requirements. End Summary.

12. (C) PM Fico told the Ambassador that the coalition was stable now, but that it had been on the brink of dissolution following the Land Fund scandal involving the HZDS party. Now, the government, which enjoys unprecedented approval ratings -- even after 18 months in office -- is poised to focus on its responsibilities. Fico noted that the government has succeeded in bringing Slovakia into Schengen and is focused now on achieving Eurozone membership in 2009. Fico stated that he was ninety-nine percent certain that Slovakia's bid would succeed, as it has met all of the Maastricht criteria. He acknowledged that the public would have to be educated about the transition, which polls show is not welcome by large numbers of Slovaks. Fico stressed that Slovakia's European orientation is very important and that the GOS seeks to coordinate its policy with the EU, whether on Kosovo or Iraq, to the largest possible extent. Referring to press reports that the opposition Christian Democrats (KDH) want to hold a referendum on ratification of the Lisbon

Treaty, Fico said that 80-90 percent of Slovaks support it and that Slovakia would ratify. Fico's mention of NATO was brief: we are a member, he said, but our priority is the EU.

13. (C) Ambassador Obsitnik made the point that the U.S. regards NATO and EU membership as complementary and expressed appreciation for the government's recent decision to augment Slovak contributions to ISAF and KFOR. Responding to PM Fico's comment about the importance of open and constructive dialogue between the U.S. and Slovakia, Ambassador Obsitnik noted the EU Summit conclusions on Kosovo and solicited the Prime Minister's view on the way forward. PM Fico -- having just emphasized the importance of EU common foreign and security policy and Slovakia's wish to coordinate with EU partners -- stated categorically that: "The EU didn't adopt any stance on status issues. There is not a unity of views within the EU on Kosovo, only a decision to send an ESDP mission." Going forward, Slovakia seeks coordination between the Kosovars ("They can't do what they want, when they want.") and the international community, i.e., the EU, U.S. and Russia, on any declaration. Slovakia does not want to be the exception or outlier on this issue. According to Fico, who readily acknowledged that the UNSC would not be able to agree a resolution, Russia must be part of the solution. Fico concluded that the EU had been very weak on Kosovo; EU foreign policy had "failed" in this case.

14. (C) Prime Minister Fico responded to Ambassador Obsitnik's question regarding the Hungarian minority in Slovakia by repeating several times that the government does not want tension within the country or with Hungary. He attributed much of the current negative dynamic to the unhealthy symbiosis between the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Coalition of Hungarian Parties (SMK), saying "they need each other." The fact that SNS and SMK have never been together in a government or in opposition has exacerbated relations and their relatively low support pushes each side toward more polemical stances in order to gain and keep voters. Fico predicted that after the next elections, both parties would be part of the opposition and that would cause this pattern to change. PM Fico briefly summarized two issues which have been raised by the Hungarian minority and taken up by GOH officials, Congressman Lantos and others in the international community: the language of geographical names in Hungarian language textbooks and Hungarian language broadcasting on Slovak Radio. Fico said the textbooks would contain both Hungarian and Slovak place names, e.g., Pozsony and Bratislava. As for minority radio programming, Fico said that Slovak Radio had moved to cut or alter programming because of budget problems, so the government stepped in to provide funding to ensure that the Hungarian broadcasts continued. PM Fico described relations between the GOS and the GOH as positive, adding that he expected Prime Minister Gyurcsany to visit in the near future. (Comment: After the meeting DCM asked Fico's foreign policy advisor, Marek Estok, whether he thought the Gyurcsany visit would take place early next year. Estok said he was "not optimistic." End Comment.) According to Fico, the so-called "national" question is stronger and more salient on the Hungarian side of the border. He added that it is incomprehensible that, as Slovakia and Hungary are entering Schengen and recently have concluded an agreement to build bridges between Slovak and Hungarian towns, any side or party should stoke nationalist tensions.

15. (SBU) PM Fico agreed with Ambassador Obsitnik's comments on the need to diversify investment in Slovakia. While the automotive sector had contributed much to Slovakia's robust growth, a problem affecting one or more of the major producers could have die effects on the Slovak economy. PM Fico praised companies such as U.S. Steel, which have not only created good jobs at good wages, but have invested in the welfare of the community. Slovakia seeks more such investors and does not view positively the creation of low-wage jobs which are likely, after a time, to move east to cheaper labor markets. At the same time, Fico added that he also favors the creation of job opportunities for Slovakia's less skilled employees.

¶6. (C) Prime Minister Fico noted with amusement the Slovak media's inaccurate coverage of the Ambassador's recent comments on the Visa Waiver Program. (Comment: some media outlets reported that the Ambassador had stated that Slovakia would be able to join VWP in 2008. The Ambassador did not make this comment, but rather expressed his desire to do all that he could to ensure progress toward the goal. End Comment.) Fico said "I knew it wasn't true, but that's the Slovak media." The Prime Minister made clear that, for him, the visa question was not one of great import. He noted that because so few Slovaks travel to the U.S., the impact of the requirements is minimal. However, Fico added that, as a lawyer by training, he believes that the lack of reciprocity between the requirements for Slovak and U.S. travelers and the fact that not all Schengen countries are treated equally is not correct.

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